



Adult Recovery Needs — Emotional Reactions



*Take care of yourself emotionally.

During a disaster and for weeks or months after, people continue to experience emotional reactions. The following are normal responses to living through an emergency situation:

- Irritability
- Fatigue
- Sleep disturbance
- Anxiety and helpless feelings
- Anger
- Disrupted sleep
- Loss of appetite
- Unusual physical ailments
- Hyperactivity

*Talk and listen to one another.

Recount the experience of the disaster. The effect will diminish with each retelling. Preparation will help alleviate worries about the future. The worst is over, and now you know what it is like, so you have the advantage of knowing how to prepare for it.

*Allow children and elders to voice their fears.

Reassure them and tell them about plans you are making.

It is OK for children to express their fears. This is how they begin to understand them. Also allow them to tell how they felt during the disaster, what they experienced and how they are feeling now. Reassure them of their safety.

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*Stress and Coping With
Disaster: A Handbook
Compiled Following the
Midwest Flood of 1993 for
Extension Professionals*,
compiled by Marty Baker
and Ami O'Neill

Stages of Recovery

Recovery unfolds in three stages:

Stage One

The central task of the first stage is safety. There is a delicate balance between re-living the trauma by talking about it, and feelings of personal safety. Safety of self, family and belongings are all components of an overall feeling of being safe. To some people, their belongings or personal property equate in a large part to their identity. The loss of belongings or personal property can be very difficult for some people to work through.

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Stage Two

The central task of the second stage is remembrance and mourning. During this stage, telling the story of personal trauma is critical. The story may involve retelling what life was like before the trauma. A show of emotions is therapeutic during this stage. Referrals to professional mental health counselors or psychologists may be necessary.

Stage Three

The central task of the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life. Reconnection may involve re-education and re-socialization with new friends and contacts. Those individuals and families most vulnerable before the crisis will tend to be the most vulnerable in recovery. Other groups in your community may be especially vulnerable to disaster-related stress.

Burnout

Teachers and other caregivers who work with children who are dealing with their own disaster-related stress, may fall victim to burnout. Symptoms of burnout include depression, irritability, anxiety, rage, exhaustion, fatigue, hyperactivity, appetite disorders, sleep disorders, inability to make decisions, external confusion, and a loss of objectivity. Human service providers experience a patchwork of their own and others' stress. Individual visits by mental health professionals to key officials and providers might be helpful to those in leadership positions.

Regular staff of human service agencies do not always receive systematic recognition or attention for the disaster-related period of overwork/overtime service. They may be experiencing disaster-related stress, but could be hesitant to talk about it. It is



often difficult for service providers to talk about their own stress, but the effects of prolonged stress on them can be evident.

Community Reaction Phases

Recovery is a slow process. When many people in a community suffer losses at the same time, community reactions during recovery seem to fit some general phases:

Heroic

During and immediately after a disaster, people tend to react with great courage. They face threats to safety and basic needs with energy and perseverance. Neighbors and outsiders alike work together to respond to the crisis.

Honeymoon

This phase begins a few weeks after the disaster and sometimes lasts several months. People begin their first intense efforts at cleanup and recovery. Although individuals may have a hard time accepting their losses, they feel that the community still cares about them. They believe that more help will come.

Disillusionment

This time of widespread discouragement may be the longest phase of recovery. Groups that helped with immediate needs withdraw from the community. People turn inward as they face the reality of their own losses. Some are disappointed in the amount of assistance given. Anger is common. Bitterness and disagreement may occur among parts of the community.

Reconstruction

Communities may not move fully into this stage for many months, a year, or more. Reconstruction requires that people recognize both community and individual needs and responsibilities. It also means that the community will not be exactly the same as it was before the disaster. People create a new community as they build together.

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Ways to Manage Stress

Talk it out.

You're not in this alone. Your family, friends and neighbors are feeling some of the same anxieties you're experiencing—maybe they can share something helpful. Tell them what you're feeling, and listen to what they say. Other sources of support can be found in your community mental health center, or in your church, synagogue or mosque. Many companies offer employee assistance programs for situations like these.



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Try physical activity

Release the tension of stress by developing a regular routine of exercise. Walking in the evenings or going through some stretching exercises are things you might want to try. If you have a physical disability, consult a physician to determine what kind of exercise is right for you.

Know your limits and make time for relaxation.

Sometimes exercising or talking about your feelings only works for a little while before something reminds you of a traumatic experience, creating anxiety all over again. It's important to remember that disasters are beyond your control. Try to reduce the amount of time you spend worrying about things you cannot change. A good way to do this is to decrease or eliminate the activities that cause stress for you. If coverage of the disaster on the evening news or in the morning paper leaves you stressed or anxious, cut down on the amount of time you spend reading the newspaper or watching the news.

Take control.

You can't control disasters or the damage caused by them, but you can take charge of your immediate situation. Once your personal circumstances are stable, you might want to do some volunteer work to help others affected by the disaster, or help organize a support group.

Avoid self-medication.

Drugs and alcohol may seem to remove stress temporarily, but in the long run they generally create problems or behavior that compound the stress you were feeling initially. Even caffeine and nicotine, agents that artificially create stress-like reactions in your

body, can have a negative effect on your ability to control the sources of anxiety in your life.

If you feel your problem is more serious, or you're experiencing thoughts of hopelessness, extreme anger, or thoughts about suicide, you should consider seeking professional help from a professional counselor, social worker, psychologist or psychiatrist.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Symptoms of PTSD include:

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- Vivid and sudden memories or flashbacks of the stressful event. These flashbacks may last from minutes to hours and may occur months or years after the trauma.
- Nightmares centering around the traumatic event. Victims often wake up screaming fear-induced responses. During waking hours, they often react intensely to loud noises.
- Avoidance phenomena that affect the person's relationships with others, because the victim often avoids close ties with family, colleagues and friends. People who suffer PTSD often say they can't feel emotions, especially toward those who are closest; if they can feel emotions, often they can't express them.
- Avoidance of accepting responsibility (particularly among war veterans) for others because they think they failed in ensuring the safety of those killed or injured during the disaster.
- Exaggerated startle reactions stemming from the fact that disaster victims suffering from the disorder are always on guard for danger. Hurricane victims may be affected by sounds such as storm winds or thunder.
- Panic attacks resulting from the extreme fear felt during the traumatic event that remains unresolved during later events in their lives. During the attack, the throat tightens, breathing and heart rate increase, and there is a feeling of dizziness or nausea.

On-going reactions

On-going reactions make people fearful of recurrent disasters and they refuse to acknowledge their fears. In turn, it can lead to illness, injury, carelessness on the job, and can affect personal relationships and daily life.

- Physical symptoms of stress (stomach distress, headaches, etc.) sometimes progressing into sicknesses and physical exhaustion.

- Children may need more parental love and physical contact and may return to bedwetting, thumb sucking, or have nightmares, and they may cling to their parents.
- Family discord, separation. Increase in spouse and child abuse in the community.
- Rejection of outside help. Difficulty accepting that the disaster had an impact upon one's life.

Setting Priorities

Recovery occurs more readily where individuals are able to see a bright future on the horizon. Many people affected by a disaster can work with someone else to develop a plan of action and set priorities. Having a plan and a list of goals can help people look toward a better future.